

MISTBINS

Jewelry artists love working with precious metal clay, or PMC®. When PMC was introduced in the United States in 1996, it was disparagingly compared to Play-Doh, but there is something about the feel of the clay in the fingers that has brought out the creativity in many jewelry designers. Today, PMC is a respected artistic medium which provides a beautiful setting for colored gemstones.

PMC is a patented product developed by Mitsubishi Material Corp. of Japan in the 1990s. Its main ingredient is microscopic particles of gold or silver, along with water and an organic binder. PMC is shaped like clay and fired in a kiln to burn off the water and binder as the metal particles fuse together. The final product is pure silver or gold, and the finishing is done by traditional metal fabrication techniques.

Because of the high temperatures involved, only a few types of stones can be set before firing, mostly laboratory-grown gems and corundum. But natural stones can also be set after firing using a bezel made of PMC or a soldered setting.

"I can't even tell you how much I love working with PMC," says designer Shahasp Valentine of San Francisco. "I love that it's so tactile. Jewelry making can feel sterile; you make the wax and send it out. [With PMC] I can do every step of the way.

"Setting stones in the wet clay and firing them in place feels like an ancient process to me, even though it is very modern," Valentine continues.

PMC was the answer to Valentine's dreams. She had been thinking about her "Lily" design since she was 13, and before PMC came out, she started creating it with FIMO®, a polymer clay. "I would buy a square. It had no intrinsic value. It was plastic. That wasn't fulfilling for me, but it was good practice. Then PMC came along. I [had already] worked out the kinks for the design with FIMO."

Colored stones are centerpieces for many of her designs. "When I started working with PMC, it didn't occur to me not to use colored stones. There are certain colors I find pleasing: Blue, purple, and periwinkle are really very pleasing colors. In the beginning, I started with small ones. Now I'm using pretty sizable stones."

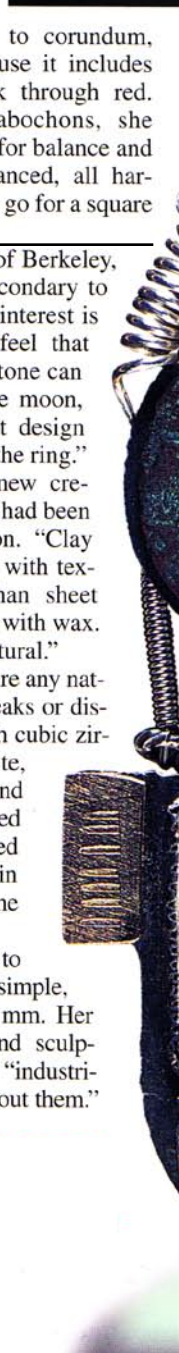
Valentine has been limited to corundum, which is fine, she says, because it includes shades from purple and pink through red. Although she often uses cabochons, she prefers princess cuts. "I'm big for balance and symmetry. I want things balanced, all harmonies . . . That's why I tend to go for a square cut; round doesn't thrill me."

To designer Hadar Jacobson of Berkeley, California, the gemstone is secondary to the jewelry design. "My main interest is in the design. . . . I don't feel that strongly about the stone. The stone can be representing something: the moon, sun, mostly light. But I don't design around the stone. I usually see the ring."

Working with clay opened new creative avenues to Jacobson, who had been working with metal fabrication. "Clay gave me a lot more possibility with texturing. It's less geometric than sheet metal, and I didn't want to deal with wax. It allowed me to be more sculptural."

Jacobson hasn't been able to fire any natural stones, because the fire breaks or distorts them. She has worked with cubic zirconia, aquamarine, alexandrite, sapphire, ruby, and garnet, and sets other stones on a soldered bezel cup. She has also worked with inserting a fine silver wire in the clay and stringing gemstone beads after it's fired.

Stones are a dramatic accent to Jacobson's pieces. She prefers simple, round cabochons, from 3 to 6 mm. Her designs are highly textured and sculptured, and she describes them as "industrial — there's nothing delicate about them."



style o selling o sources

colored stone

U.S. \$5.99 / CAN \$6.99